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Centennial year of Methodism
in Alabama



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Centennial Year of Methodism in Alabama.

At request of Rev. J. M. Mason, D. D., Presiding Elder of the Eufaula District, Alabama Conference, the following history of the Methodist Church in Dale County was prepared by J. M. Carmichael, and published by the Quarterly Conference of Ozark Church.

As far back as 1818, the Austins, Waldings, Beveretts and some others, perhaps, settled in the territory now embraced in the County of Dale, at a point three miles northeast of Midland City; and, while there may have been now and then a squatter in other sections of the territory, this was the first settlement in the County, or so nearly so, that the proposition cannot be successfully denied. Soon after those mentioned, Isaac Ledbetter, John Whitehurst, Grandfather to Albert Bowen, Missionary to China, Peter Dunham, William Byrd, Isham Byrd, Thomas Dawsey, Daniel Windham, and others joined their fortunes with those of the earlier settlers in the lovely frontier country.

Such a thing in those days as a church house was unknown, bush-arbors furnishing the only shelter for the occasional preaching services. The settlers lived in very indifferent and humble board and log camps, and did not for some time construct like buildings for churches or church service. By and by, a house of worship was constructed at Walding's Cross Roads, six miles east of where Newton now is and was used in common by Methodists and Baptists, until after 1845, when the Methodists set up for themselves, near to the point known for so many years as Sylvan Grove, the church being called Zoar, and the church at the Cross Roads becoming a Primitive Baptist Church.

The first house of their own, in which Methodists worshiped, at Sylvan Grove, was a small log house, used for a school house, which they continued to use for some years, and until after 1843, when they constructed a neat log building, of good size, and named it Zoar Church. The building was used until 1857, when the members of the church, built a neat frame church, of good size, being among the first framed churches in the country.

Old Zion church, three or four miles southeast of Haw Ridge, con-

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structed chiefly by uncle Zachie Dowling, was perhaps the first framed church in the country. Uncle Zachie Dowling, as will be presently seen, was one of the first two preachers appointed to a regular work embracing the County of Dale.

It is almost impossible to sketch facts connected with Methodism, in this county, without touching some of the neighboring counties.

The late Rev. Dempsy Dowling, moved from South Carolina, and halted and remained a year or two, in the Austin neighborhood, perhaps the first settlement, and then crossed the river and came to the vicinity of the present Ozark, where he lived to a good old age, being all the while a local preacher. He reached this County about the year 1826.

From an early period in the County's history, there was occasional preaching by Methodist preachers, notably by Rev. John McDonald, who preached the first sermon in the county in 1818, and others later. In about the year 1829, a church was built in the vicinity of the point where Claybank now stands, and was succeeded by Claybank, a Methodist church, and from that time forward, the community was largely Methodistic, having among its ministers, some local and some itinerant; Rev's. Zachie Dowling, Dempsy Dowling, John Dowling, Zinnamon Dowling, Levi Dowling, Benj. Hildreth, James Lasseter, and later, Rev. Angus Dowling, who was for about fifty years a member of the Alabama Conference, and who did much effective work in the locality where he was reared as well as in other sections of the state, and in Florida.

In about the year 1833 the first Methodist Church was built at Asbury and one has followed another for all the years since then and there is still a good, strong church surrounded by a religious community.

In the year 1826 the first Mission in Southeast Alabama was formed and was called the Pea River Mission and was connected with the Tallahassee District of the South Carolina Conference.

In 1821 Florida was acquired by a treaty with Spain. The South Carolina Conference organized in the fall of that year, their missionary work in Florida and Southeast Alabama. Among the Circuits established was the Early Mission. The Missionary was J. Trigg. This Mission was central about Blakely, Ga., and Columbia, Ala. It extended into Alabama as far as the Choctawhatchee River, and the first churches organized in Southeast Alabama were in the bounds of that Circuit; the oldest being New Hope Church, in Barbour County.

The Presiding Elder was Josiah Evans, and the preacher was Daniel McDonald. The circuit lines in that day, and even later, were indefinite, so what was embraced in the circuit cannot now be clearly stated, but it is probable that Bro. McDonald preached wherever he could find a congregation, in all the southern part of the State. In 1827, J. C. Wright was appointed to this work, Bro. McDonald, at

Grove, Beaver Creek, possibly Big Creek and some points in Henry County.

The writer's mother—a Presbyterian in Georgia—but without a church at that time in Dale, became a Methodist, joined the church under Uncle Zacky's ministry, and lived an humble, pious life for more than fifty years. He opened the doors of the church at each service and this was the hymn he sang:

"Come ye sinners, poor and needy,
Weak and wounded, sick and sore;
Jesus ready stands to save you.
Full of pity, love and power;
He is able;
He is willing, doubt no more."

Father Dowling was as nearly a perfect pattern of religious demeanor as one would find in an age. While he was a young man he was a soldier in what is known as the British War of 1812, and sometime after the war, he became a member of the South Carolina Conference, and by that Conference, was appointed to work in Alabama. His preaching was able and sound doctrinally, and put his hearers on notice that if they expected to reach the promised land they must live clean and self-denying holy lives. He was well mounted, upon a horse finely caparasoned, and named "Packy," antedating in the service of the conference, the service of the horse he subsequently called "Dicky."

He always dressed well, usually in first class black broad cloth, and was scrupulously clean—not smoking or chewing. He died in Butler County, Ala., at about the age of ninety three—full of years and good works which he did, and was buried near Greenville.

In 1846 the Choctawhatchee work was filled by T. J. Campbell and J. W. McCann, father of the two McCanns now members of the Alabama Conference.

In 1847 T. J. Campbell and J. D. Worrell were appointed to the work, which must have been a very large one; for during the year Bro. McCann preached in the Sylvan Grove section. Bro. Campbell was never seen there, and during the next year he alone was there—his co-workers evidently being in some other section of the country.

In 1848, A. S. Harris was the preacher, and in 1849, Harris Stearns.

In 1859, Choctawhatchee disappears from the Annual Conference minutes, and it is difficult to determine exactly what Circuit embraced the work in Dale County; but the better opinion seems to be that there were two circuits even before the Haw Ridge Circuit was created in 1857, and Sylvan Grove in 1858. The local Circuit has the following

the end of one year, reported 124 whites and 21 colored, received in the church; and Bro Wright, in a year, increased the membership to 216 whites and 35 colored. These figures show two facts worthy of note: 1st. That Methodism took hold readily in this section. 2nd. That in spite of the fact that our church has been reproached as a slave-holding church, our preachers carried the gospel to the slaves and gave them the same pastors and the same church advantages that their masters had. It may be further stated, that, in the old time, many slaves were as genuine christians as could be found, and rejoiced in common with their masters upon revival occasions. Bro. Wright remained on the work two years. Sandy Wooly was in charge of the work in 1829. In 1830, M. Bedell and George Collier were the preachers in this work, which embraced at least all the territory in Alabama south of Union Springs and Eufaula. In 1831, the Georgia Conference was formed, and embraced this territory. The preacher appointed to the work that year, was John Sale. Two preachers were sent to Pea River Mission in 1832, John Sale and W. C. Crawford. The Alabama Conference was formed in 1832, but this part of the State was not then included in it.

In 1833, Southeast Alabama and West Florida were ceded from the Georgia to the Alabama Conference, and a District formed, called Chattahoochee District, embracing Montgomery, Ala., and Pensacola, Fla., and all the intervening territory, and all between those points and the Chattahoochee river, south of the Indian Reservation. In the new District the first appointment was Chattahoochee Mission, and the preachers sent to it were Zacheus Dowling, and Humphrey Williamson; so that the first preacher who can be positively identified as connected with Methodism in Dale county, was Zacheus Dowling, who belonged to a family prominent in Methodism from that time, until the present, and has never been without a representative in the Methodist pulpit of Alabama. Rev. Angus Dowling, now deceased, and Rev. Z. A. Dowling, still living, and an active efficient preacher in the North Alabama Conference, being the successors to the old time preachers of the Dowling family, to-wit: Dempsy, Zacheus, Levi, John and Zinnamon Dowling.

In 1834, G. W. Cotton and D. C. McEntyre were sent to Choctawhatchee; Anthony Dickinson in 1835; J. D. Loftin in 1836, F. H. Ponder in 1839; Charles Strider in 1840; W. A. McCarty and A. Pearce, in 1841 J. W. Tally; in 1842 James Peeler and H. E. Hill; in 1843 and in the latter year, T. G. Gilmore with Mr. Peeler; in 1844, James Shanks and B. F. Hill.

At this point, there is lack of data upon which to predicate a definite statement as to Circuits and appointments; nevertheless, Zacheus Dowling, between the years 1842 and 1846, preached for at least two years upon some circuit in Dale County with appointments at Sylvan

record entry:

"The Annual Conference, at its session in 1858, made a station of Woodville and Columbia and changed the name of the Circuit from Woodville to Sylvan Grove.

D. B. Creech, Recording Secretary."

Immediately following the creation of the station of Woodville and Columbia, and the Sylvan Grove Circuit, in 1858, the local records show that nearly all the eastern portion of Dale County and a large part of Henry County were embraced in the new Circuit and remained so, except as to upper Henry until 1872. The Circuit was composed almost entirely of the former Woodville Circuit, which was more than probably formed upon the abolition of the Choctawhatchee Mission, and remained the Circuit until the formation of the station composed of Columbia and Woodville.

Before Sylvan Grove was formed in 1858, Allen Box, L. P. Golson, William Adams, and W. P. Miller were the preachers at Zoar Church, now Sylvan Grove, during the period between 1850 and 1858, but they served no more than six years; Box, one year; Miller, two years; Golson, in 1857, one year; and Adams, two years. There was evidently some other covering the other two years, whose name is not shown by records or remembered at this time.

Up to as late as 1856, there was no Methodist Church in any village in Dale County, but during the period between 1848 and 1860, there appears to have been constructed a considerable number of churches; for, in 1860, these were the churches herein following, embracing a portion of what is now Geneva County and Henry County, to wit: Bethel, Sylvan Grove, Claybank, Post Oak, Magnolia, Browns, Chittys, Mt. Carmel, Beaver Creek, Big Creek, Bush's, Panther Creek, Newton, Haw Ridge, Zion, Mt. Zion, Pleasant Hill, Asbury, Clark's Mill, Skipperville, Clopton, Echo, Wesley Chapel. The following preachers served the Sylvan Grove Circuit from the time of its creation till 1872, to wit:

J. W. Solomon, Wesley B. Dennis, 1859; W. A. Montgomery, 1860; J. J. Cassady, 1861; D. T. Hamner, 1864, D. T. Hamner, 1865; W. R. Talley, 1866; J. L. Skipper, 1867, D. T. Hamner, 1868; D. T. Hamner, 1869; Mr. Cooper in 1870-1; H. M. Gillis, 1872; W. P. H. Connerly.

From 1861 to 1864, Sylvan Grove Circuit seems to have been dropped for the time being, and Haw Ridge and Asbury Circuits to have taken its place with W. P. Miller as preacher in charge for 1863, the record not appearing for 1862, but probably Henry Metcalf as a supply.

About the year 1859, W. R. Talley served the Newton Mission and before him Messrs Carter and Campbell, first names not remembered.

Afterwards William Bush as a supply.

At this point it may not be amiss to leave the consideration of the eastern portion of the county for a time, and turn to Haw Ridge, which is found to appear in 1857, with R. Smiley, as preacher in charge.

J. J. Latham, 1858, W. R. Tally, 1860; W. R. Tally and James Parker in 1861; W. P. Miller, 1862; E. L. Loveless, 1863, J. L. Skipper, 1864; J. P. Jones, 1865; J. A. Parker, 1866; W. A. Sampey, 1867; W. A. Sampey, 1868.

About this time Ozark Circuit was created, and T. S. Armstead appointed to the work, in 1869; and the following afterwards:

1870-1, A. S. Dickinson; 1872-3-4, A. Dowling; 1875-6, H. Gillis; 1877-8-9, E. M. Turner; 1880-1, J. L. Mathison; 1882, J. L. Skipper; 1883, N. Gillis; 1884-5-6-7, A. Dowling; 1888-9-1890, A. L. Sellers; 1891-2-3-4, A. Hood; 1895-6-7, B. C. Glenn; 1898-9-1900, L. H. S. Chappell; 1901-2, C. A. Cornell; 1903-4-5-6, A. J. Cousius; 1908, J. P. Hamilton.

It will be observed that from 18— to 18—, Ozark has been a Station. After the formation of the Station at Ozark, the remainder of the circuit with some other appointments continued for some years, until the Daleville circuit was formed about the year —.

Returning to the eastern and southern portion of the county, it appears that Newton circuit was formed about the year 1872; and since that time has been served by the following preachers, to-wit:

Hugh Gillis, M. Johnson, John A. Green, L. C. Calhoun, Frank Wardlaw, E. E. Cowan, John Sanders, J. K. Powell, J. L. Skipper, Neal Gillis, Angus Dowling, Angus L. Sellers, — Lewis, T. H. Jones, L. P. Latham, J. M. Green, C. G. Winslett, A. B. Brown, C. A. Williams, S. L. Jones, J. P. Hudson, present pastor.

Daleville Circuit has been served by the following pastors:

J. L. Mathison, Neal Gillis, Angus Dowling, S. U. Turnipseed, R. E. Rutledge, Benj. Segrest, W. F. Arnold, O. G. Goodwin.

From 1840 to 1860 the Methodist church grew rapidly in Dale county. There were many revivals, many conversions, and a consequent ingathering of members. The camp meetings before and since the great war, were useful instrumentalities, in forwarding the interest of the church.

Within the past few years, neat and comfortable churches have been constructed at Pinckard, Midland City, and Grimes, the latter not fully completed. The pastor, George Winslett, aided with his own hands in building several churches, notably at Newton a brick church, and also a church at Pinckard.

Camp Meetings.

As early as 1841, and continuing for three years, a camp meeting was organized and held at Zion church, three miles southeast of Haw

Ridge, which was very largely attended and much good accomplished from a religious standpoint. Some persons without the fear of God, or the laws of the land before their eyes, disturbed the people met for worship, and they were arrested and brought before Rev. Levi Dowling, a local preacher and a Justice of the Peace, who bound them over to the County court, of which Gappa T. Yelverton was Judge. On trial, he convicted them and fined each of them twenty-five dollars.

Between 1850-60, a camp meeting was held at the Watford camp ground, on Big Creek, then Dale county, for several years, and was well attended and successful. Of course the devil was there—he always goes to camp meetings—and influenced by him, a lot of rowdy fellows got up a horse race near the camp ground, and one of the young men was thrown and killed. After this, there was no further meeting at this place.

Perhaps about 1846-7, a camp meeting was held at what was called the Chitty camp ground, at Bethel church, nine miles east of Ozark. The writer, in company with his father and mother, though a small boy, attended this meeting, which was generally, well attended, the attendants being smartly sprinkled with the lawless element then in this county.

Presiding Elder Armstrong, who had charge of the meeting, stated that a story had been told to the effect that when the Lord made the people of clay, He set them up by the side of trees to dry, and that some of them fell down and scrambled off before any brains were put into their heads; "and," added the preacher, I seem to hear his voice even till this day, now sixty years ago, 'if that be so, I see the descendants of those brainless ones, stalking around this camp ground.'

A camp meeting of no great proportions was held at Claybank quite a long while ago, for some years. It was local in its makeup; and the meeting was in the interest of the good people of the community and their children.

Beginning in October, 1868 a great camp meeting was inaugurated at China Grove, and continued for eleven years, embracing 1879. Bishop W. M. Wightman having held the District meeting at Newton, stayed over to the camp meeting, the first one, and preached a great sermon on Sunday to thousands of hearers, his text being Psalm 80, verse the 1st. The attendants at this camp meeting during all its life, were from the three states, Alabama, Florida, and Georgia, and a dozen counties. There were at times perhaps a hundred tents and shacks, besides the camps, wagons and the like. The crowds in attendance often exceeded five thousand in number. The best preaching talent of the conference was there, and many conversions resulted from the work done. The good accomplished was incalculable; several preachers being added to the conference as a result of the meeting, notably, J. L. Mathison.

Circuit Riders.

The work and labor performed by the Methodist Circuit Riders in the early days in Dale and surrounding counties, was very heavy and not confined to preaching at regular appointments and protracted meetings, but involved long rides and exposure to sun, heat, rain, and frequently fared not by any means too comfortable.

The number of appointments upon a circuit were more than twice as many as now, far apart, most of the people poor, and the fare correspondingly indifferent but the preacher came promptly to his appointments and with cheerful words, advice, prayers and encouragement to his members, stirred them up to seek better conditions, temporal and spiritual.

The preachers, were, generally speaking, as able as the Conference possessed, and that is saying much, for the old time circuit rider, was inspired by the importance of the work, in a backwoods country, and was not idle in his long rides but studied his books while riding, and was given to much prayer. As a result his sermons were touched with a spirit of enthusiasm, aroused by religious aspirations, and a sacred devotion to the business of his Lord in soul saving. Buggies were rarely seen in the early days and it followed that the preacher traveled on horseback, and carried with him a capacious pair of saddle bags in which he carried his clothing, some good books of his own and often a hymn book or Bible ordered by some member of his church. As soon as he organized a church the next thing was a Sabbath School, which usually lasted no longer than the summer months, their duration doubtless influenced by a want of equipment, such as is used in the schools of today. Nevertheless they left their imprints upon the hearts and minds of many who have gone home to Heaven.

Local Preachers.

Dr. J. S. Sappington, Newton; Dr. H. I. M. Kennon, Westville; R. C. Gibson, C. W. McAlister, J. D. McCullers, Sylvan Grove; Henry Metcalf, near Asbury, Mr. Fleming, near Clifton, Polk Babston, Echo; Daniel Riley, Wesley Riley, William Loftin, D. L. Miller near Echo and Mt. Carmel church; T. L. Smith near Newton, William Bush, near where Hartford is in Geneva county; James C. Skipper near Beaver Creek; Joseph Calloway, John W. Broxton, Benj. Hildreth, Dr. Clements, all residing in the vicinity of Westville, Nathaniel Skipper, near Skipperville; Levi Dowling, Dempsy Dowling, John Dowling, Irvin Johnson, all residing in the vicinity where Ozark now is; Angus Lee, Newton; Dr. Franklin residing at Haw Ridge; Mr. Baker near Skipperville; John McDonald, uncle to John W., Angus and all the sons of Noel Dowling, and is hereinbefore mentioned as the first preacher in Dale county residing near Skipperville, William Chapman,

near Rockey Head

These men of precious memory were upon the ground floor of Methodism in Dale county. and served the people as Gospel Ministers, with much ability, and fidelity. They were self-denying and devoted men, men whose greatest store of wealth, was their character and religion, men who were respected by reason of their high character, by even the worst men in the country, and hence their influence in aiding to elevate and civilize the country, to say nothing of their power and abundant work in the pulpit. They constituted a strong reserve force for the itinerant ministry, who relied upon them as support in every public battle with sin and satan.

They were men who generally earned their living by the sweat of the face, though some had considerable means, yet in every instance, when called upon by the preacher in charge, they were ready to drop the plow in the furrow, and hasten to the indicated place of service, and remain, even to the neglect of their home affairs, working, praying, and then, when they returned home, by hard labor and extra effort, make up for the time lost while absent at the protracted meeting.

They had monthly appointments and frequently oftener covering a large territory, and the preacher in charge was fortunate who had a number of them in his Circuit. They were strong help and good counsellors and the itinerants loved and relied upon them. They were often equal in preaching ability if not superior to the preacher in charge, and their congregations were usually good, and heard them gladly. They worked in season and out of season, without fee or hope of reward in this world. They could read their titles clear to mansions in the skies, and to reach that "house not made with hands," and carry with them their neighbors and friends, was the greatest object and purpose of their lives.

The stronghold that Methodism has in Dale County today is due in a considerable measure to the work of her local preachers. We shall never see their like again. With a few exceptions, they have passed over the river to "rest under the shade of the trees." Peace to their ashes, the dear old men!

Dale County has probably furnished a larger number of itinerant ministers to the conference according to population than any other county in the state, among them the following:

W. A. McCarty, W. F. Arnold, Jos. Sollie, T. F. Mangum, Albert Bowen, J. L. Skipper, A. Dowling, C. P. Atkinson, R. R. Jones, J. L. Mathison, T. B. Barrow, John Mathison, J. P. Sanders, J. W. Mathison, Albert Mathison, S. D. Duncan, W. A. Prince, John W. Solomon, Benj. Segrest, L. T. Reynolds, Robert J. Ross, J. M. Munn, J. K. Powell.

Notes.

Daniel McDonald was father to D. S. McDonald, who became a member of the North Alabama Conference. Daniel McDonald himself went to Choctaw County and there departed this life.

Mr. Campbell who served the Newton Mission, as associate with Mr. Carter, was a Major in the Confederate army and was killed in one of the great battles of Virginia.

William Bush was a commissioner of Dale County for many years and a member of the Legislature for sometime. He was an intense Confederate and towards the close of the great war was driven from his home for a time.

Allen Box was born and reared in Henry County, was a fine singer and revivalist. He moved to the state of Louisiana, and was reported to have become a great preacher.

James A. Parker transferred to the Louisiana, and has for years been a prominent figure in that connection. He was a preacher of decided ability.

T. J. Campbell was a Scotchman, a bachelor, and a little peculiar. It is told of him that passing along a lane of one Henry Reeves, the peach trees very large, overhanging the road and loaded with fruit, he stopped his horse and began peeling and eating some peaches. Reeves cried out "You are doing wrong my friend." "Is that so," replied Campbell, "Well, I make a habit of quitting wrong doing as soon as possible," and filling his pocket with peaches he rode on.

Uncle Zacky Dowling was an austere man, with some peculiarities. Among other things, it is said of him that in a back-woods county as ours was, at that time, there were few persons who had sufficient quilts and blankets to keep him comfortable in winter time.

James Peeler, a very popular preacher, a good singer and revivalist, and for whom a number of boys in Dale County were named, among them Peeler Dowling, Peeler Parish, Peeler McDonald, Peeler Snell and perhaps others, transferred to the Florida Conference and thence removed to Texas, where he, being a good business man, became a man of considerable wealth. He never ceased to be a man of stern piety and an able preacher.

W. P. Miller, once a Presiding Elder in the Methodist Church, South, Alabama Conference, joined the church North, parting company with his friends, of whom he had many. He became a Presiding Elder in the church North.

The traveling preachers hereinbefore named were, all of them, men of fair ability and many of them first-class in all respects. They would have honored any position in church or state.

Dr. W. A. McCarty was an attorney at law in his young days and a very successful one; but was converted and became, as all know, a

distinguished Methodist minister.

Dr. J. S. Sappington, Dr. H. I. M. Kennon and Dr. Fleming were all physicians and men of first class ability as such and by no means men of ordinary pulpit power.

Dr. Sappington was for several years a member of the South Georgia Conference but located and moved to Alabama where he practiced medicine and preached occasionally.

C. W. McAllister was an itinerant in the South Georgia conference for several years. He located and came to Alabama, where he preached as a local preacher as long as he lived. He departed this life Nov. 8, 1873. I find the following tribute to him, adopted at the ensuing Quarterly Conference, as shown by the record:

"TRIBUTE OF RESPECT."

"Whereas, it has pleased Almighty God to remove from our midst our beloved brother C. W. McAllister, a local preacher, an affectionate member of this Conference;

"Therefore, resolved by this Quarterly Conference at Wesley Chappel, on the 25th day of November, 1873, that, although in the death of our dear beloved brother, we recognize the hand of Him that doeth all things well, we cannot but feel sad, that one so noble and useful has been taken from amongst us.

"Resolved, that, as a further expression of our sincere regret at our loss, we as a body, tender to his bereaved wife and family our sympathy;

"Resolved, that the Secretary be instructed to set apart a page of our memorial to his memory."

"H. M. GILLIS."

"J. D. McCULLERS."

Rev. Robert Reynolds Jones, was born and reared in Dale county, and is now about twenty-four years of age. He was licensed to preach in the M. E. Church, South at an early age, while he was yet in his teens. He exhibited capacity for preaching while he was a small boy; twelve years of age. He has for years been doing evangelistic work, and has distinguished himself as an earnest, able preacher, and the Lord has blessed and crowned his labors with success,

The Eufaula District is now, 1908, under the administration of Dr. J. M. Mason, in many respects, one of the ablest, if not the ablest preacher in the Alabama Conference, and everything in the District is moving along as it always does, when a master's hand is at the helm.

Dr. J. P. Hamilton is the preacher in charge of the Station at Ozark. He is a preacher of ability the son of the distinguished Dr. Jefferson Hamilton for a long time a leading member of the Alabama Conference.

The church at Ozark has experienced a gracious revival within the

last few weeks, Rev. R. R. Jones, aided by Dr. Hamilton, being the chief preacher.

All of which is respectfully submitted,

J. M. CARMICHAEL.

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